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VISITING
Over the River

4
DAYS
IN THE
GULF
Photographic Journey
of a Disaster

A NEW
BREED OF
SHARKS
Swimming without Sam
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UP!

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Witness to One of the Largest
Ecological Disasters Ever

On the Cover:

Photo by David Schrott of Christine Ehrsam. Hair by Leo Rodriguez and makeup by Ines Justiniano of DFB Studios. Bee face painting by Deric Hettinger of the Root 222 Crew.

On this Page:

Photo by David Schrott of Alissa Cox. Fashion provided by aZura. Hair and makeup by Daymaker Hair Studio.

Drawn by an overwhelming need to witness the impact of the Gulf Coast oil spill, a local photographer dodges the law, bonds with the locals, and documents first-hand one of the greatest ecological tragedies in our country's history.



40 DAYS

Story and Photography by Jordan Bush

Recently, I noticed that I had a very rare four-day weekend and wanted to utilize that time to do something truly meaningful. So I decided to grab some gear and take my camera south to Louisiana and capture some images of the oil spill in the Gulf. While I am no longer a full-time photographer, I invest almost all of my efforts into photography; my ultimate life pursuit is to communicate, through the candor of my lens, intense social issues to the world. Grossly under-covered and misrepresented, I felt the oil spill in the Gulf Coast needed to be further explored and explained. To me, it was an obvious and very simple decision to use that window of opportunity and get started. So I booked a flight to Louisiana and headed for the airport.

My departure was Friday, May 28th at 11:55AM from Philadelphia International, booked just two days prior. I had until Memorial Day at 8:10PM CST to get in, photograph the oil, and get back on the plane to be at work Tuesday morning; there was not a minute to waste. I mentioned my plans to a few close friends; in an effort to keep me safe, many of them forwarded countless web links to articles discussing the (threat of) arrest for photographers documenting the spill. But as long as you are on public property, arrests for capturing images of a contentious issue like this are entirely illegal, though quite common. Reading through these articles, I developed a new found rage and highly motivating frustration, further instilling my desire and commitment to go to Louisiana.

Sociologically, institutions in positions of influence (like BP) fear the power of photography because it can communicate real truth with relative ease, changing public perception and affecting the shareholders' wallets. Almost immediately upon arriving, I received reports of BP having photographers arrested, with many areas blocked off entirely from public access. It was then (Saturday morning) I fully grasped the significance of what I was doing. I realized my task was greater than I had anticipated. I had no clue how I was going to get near the oil and stay out of jail, with BP's famed oil rig a mere forty miles off shore.

During my stint, I stayed with a good friend of mine, Cody Willhite. Cody took me into the French Quarter in New Orleans on Saturday to shoot and to explore, but my mind was in utter chaos the entire day. Then, late Saturday evening, Cody received a call from his friend Mark Spitz, completely out of no where. Amazingly enough, Mark is a photojournalist in New Orleans, and Cody handed me the phone. We started talking, and I told him who I was, what I was trying to do, and how much time I had. He told me he was arrested twice for this same thing. I gave him my phone number; thirty minutes later a fisherman from Grand Isle, Louisiana called me. There on Bourbon Street, in the course of an hour, I went from not having a prayer to chartering a boat for the next morning which would put me on oil-covered beaches.

I ended up chartering a boat with Al, a former fisherman and worker in a local shrimp processing plant at Grand Isle. Since fishing was closed, he hadn't had work in over a month and was glad to take me out. It was a risk, and I wasn't so sure we'd be on public beaches.

The beaches did not look at all like what I expected to see. My expedition occurred while the spill remained in its early stages. The beaches were not covered in a black, refined oil as in the Exxon Valdez spill. Instead,





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small balls of a reddish brown substance covered the beaches. It was sticky, had a sweet smell to it (almost like molasses), and was everywhere. The toxins rolled in the surf, mixing with the sand to form what are called "tar balls." Visually it wasn't at all what I had anticipated. The oil that was on the water formed a smooth sheen on the surface and behaved much like a lava lamp. It moved with the currents, tides, and wind, almost like it had a mind of its own. Anywhere it went, devastation was sure to follow

The effects of the spill rippled beyond the waters of the Gulf, affecting more than just the beaches. It was much more devastating than I had imagined—destroying the fishing industry, wildlife, killing and eroding coastlines, and draining tourism. And now, since the oil has only grown greater in mass, millions and millions of gallons leaching into the sea, the concerns for the destruction and devastation of that area have increased as well.

Unquestionably, the most upsetting element of this journey came in hearing stories from the locals who were so gracious as to share their innermost thoughts. The shrimping and fishing industries are completely shattered, simply destroyed almost overnight. Whole communities, whose livelihoods depend almost solely on the Gulf waters are now trying to piece together what remains. Terry, one of the fishermen I spoke with, remarked, "I dropped out of high school when I was fifteen to shrimp, and I have spent the last thirty years fishing. I have never filled out a job application in my life; what am I going to do?" I couldn't help but wonder if anyone would ever know of Terry's heart-wrenching plight.

Other people from along the coast perpetually approached me wherever I went—in New Orleans, Grand Isle, Baton Rouge, and everywhere in between. When you have a northern accent and carry two excessively large cameras around everywhere you go, you tend to attract attention in the Deep South. Folks wanted to inquire as to why I was there, and I took great care to approach the subject with extreme sensitivity. Regardless, I was not expecting the reaction that I observed. After surviving Hurricane Katrina and the utter chaotic devastation that was New Orleans in its aftermath, these people had nothing left to give. Despite their strong spirits and the communal sense of confidence that is so often portrayed in the media, there was no more emotion to exhibit, no more tears left to shed, hardly any hope for the life that once was theirs. That emptiness was not something I could capture in a hundred lifetimes; nor would I want to if I could.



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Through this journey of discovery, I ultimately found that the media usually pushes the truth to extremes; the good might not be quite so good, and the bad perhaps not quite so bad. I saw first hand that the images presented in the media pass through biased filters, communicating largely what parent corporations want the masses to see, because it sells. I learned how little I really knew about what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and that it was far worse than anything I had ever heard. Much of what I discovered about that disaster invalidated a majority of the concepts I was taught in my formal education, chiefly, a class entitled Sociology of Disaster. Ideas that I accepted for years as absolute truth, were, in the course of a weekend, completely shattered—a very hard lesson for me to learn.

As citizens of the world, we need to be acutely aware that our choices have direct consequences associated with them, regardless of what limited views we see in the media or in our own lives. If you don't want oil drilling, consume less oil. This type of social change must start on a local level with people like you and me. The next time you buy a car, find one that is fuel efficient. Plan your daily errands to save on fuel; carpool or use public transit if you can. Power and heat your home with alternative energy. Simple things, like using fewer plastics or even just recycling, have the potential for significant impact. Pay attention to political issues—question everything and make sure you understand the consequences of our global oil thirst.

As I finish writing this article, I am once again in Louisiana, this time attempting to focus on the lives that have been devastated. There are so many; I hardly know where to begin. But something must be done. 🌱

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